PERSONAL LANDSCAPE

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IDEAS ABOUT POEMS III.

Folk poetry, both ancient and modern, shows a remarkable callousness (e. g. "Och Johnny I hardly knew you..." and "A handsome young airman lay dying..."). And J. Synge, a writer who was consciously basing his art on the life of the common people, said that poetry must become "brutal".

That is to say that more sophisticated poetry, if it is to have any force, has also to be rooted in the uncivilized layers of the mind, where what is ugly and what is beautiful can both be contemplated and do not exclude each other.

Nowadays, through living in a more urban and controlled society, a poet starts off with a tenderer heart and a weaker stomach than, let us say, an Elizabethan. To write good poetry he has to brutalize himself back out of his upbringing. His dangers are that, faced with injustice, violence and squalor, he may either get numb, frigid, over-intellectual, or soft, sentimental.

The capacity for pity and the capacity for scientific detachment may both be valuable to him in the rest of his life but they are dangerous to him as a poet. Pity and disgust and the scientific attitude are all attitudes of separation, not of joining. (Though pity or disgust might provide the necessary impulse to begin writing.) True poetry is a dance in which you take part and enjoy yourself.

This is the real meaning of the old definition of poetry as giving "pleasure" (where we are inclined to say 'truth'). This, too, is what Yeats meant when he said, "passive suffering is not a proper subject for poetry", and when he said, "The Muses are women and love the embraces of the 'warty' (sexy) boys".

B. S.

SARCOPHAGI

Excellent ritual of oils, of anointing,
office of priests;
everything was paid before these dead put on
the armless dress of their sarcophagi,
lying down in Phoenicia.

pillowing their heavy sculptured heads, their broad
foreheads like rides of sand, the rock of the chin,
the mouth, the simple map of the face, the carved
hair in full sail.

Surrender of sunlight and market and the white
loops of the coast,
was simply a journey, a bargain rigid as stone :
though youth took passage.

Stretched by the salt and echoing roads to the West
twenty six bargain-makers of Phoenicia;
twenty six dead with wide eyes,
confident of harbour.

Bernard Spencer.

FRONTIER.

A turn in the road. The bare and echoing shed.
A few men armed. Long tables for the Customs.
And there in the country grass some chickens fed,
and children were making a private world with their calling
where there were trees and a house. A clerk
with reddened eyes,
slowly turned marriage, travel and birth to paper,
like indexing the dead :
released one waiting figure towards the bed
of a lover, so long starved for, morning and night;
others a hundred miles to an epidemic,
to power, to a famine, to be quite alone :

gravely would write, though some slipped by like spies
with wild thoughts in their head,
in columns for them; in columns too for those
who saw in absolute file, in moody gun,
a permanence, a being somehow right,
like rocks, like turns in the road, like children's cries.

Bernard Spencer.

ACRE.

In Acre it wasn't simply the peeping alleys,
the cobbles and the grave and Frankish gate :
towers stone by stone surrendering
all their Crusading darkness up to the sun;
though these could touch or fascinate :
not squares chattering with colours,
the long and leaping boats heeled on their sides :
melons and nets, and under arches the Eastern
sea gay as a scarf :
then the Turkish mosque fountaining delicate
columns like sheltered thoughts.
But not these nor
the useful whitened petrol tins
tracing the metalled high-road, nor the Arab
cemetery grieving for a few decades
where the town flung its rubbish.
Any such symbols,
or the whole jangled argument of eras
and lusts and cries for justice, might set fire to
the poet's immoderate, promiscuous love.

Bernard Spencer.

LA VERDAD.

Il m'a dit :

J'ai vu se lever sur le sable
L'heure où la paupière du ciel
Se ferma sur son œil de verre

Pour une balle dans le ventre
Comme un inexprimable enfant
Mal secret perle patiente

Et je regardais fixement
Le caillot de ses lèvres belles
Et les sanglants banderilles
Que stupidement il traînait

Au moment de la vérité

Georges Gorse.

GARDEN. MA'ADI.

Seed stirring in the womb of twilight, in the sad
air vibrant with needles of the fountain, fear
grown wind or trees—these as if unreal children, glad
and losing brightness, fruit the soil must bear
small as the ticking of a watch, as silence, move
in what unsure vast envelope of love!

They have been sent, gifts or faint pleading letters (though
to be unopened) into the cold unbiddable night
—the dangerous, the tired time, the dim world of the old :
surely the tree grows weary of its fruit.
the womb of being closed, the child of ripening :
surely the fountain overflows the spring.

Terence Tiller.

THE HERALDIC UNIVERSE.

Logic tries to describe the world; but it is never found adequate for the task. Logic is not really an instrument : merely a method.

Describing, logic limits. Its law is causality.

Poetry by an associative approach transcends its own syntax in order not to describe but to be the cause of apprehension in others :

Transcending logic it invades a realm where unreason reigns, and where the relations between ideas are sympathetic and mysterious—affective—rather than causal, objective, substitutional.

I call this The Heraldic Universe, because in Heraldry the object is used in an emotive and affective sense—statically to body forth or utter : not as a victim of description.

The Heraldic Universe is that territory of experience in which the symbol exists—as opposed to the emblem or badge, which are the children of algebra and substitution.

It is not a "state of mind" but a continuous self-subsisting plane of reality towards which the spiritual self of man is trying to reach out through various media : artists like antennae boring into the unknown through music or paint or words, suddenly strike this Universe where for every object in the known world there exists an ideogram.

Since words are inadequate they can only render all this negatively—by an oblique method.

"Art" then is only the smoked glass through which we can look at the dangerous sun.

Lawrence Durrell.

FOR A NURSERY MIRROR.

Image, Image, Image answer
Whether son or whether daughter,
The persuader or the dancer,
A bird's beak poking out of the flesh!
A bird's beak singing between the eyes.

"The earth is a loaf,
Image, Image, Image,
The wet part is joined to the dry,
Like the joints of Adam."

It is dark now. Rise.
Between the nonself and the self
Cover the little wound
With soft red clay,
From the hit of the wind of death,
From the chink of the pin of day.

The heart's cold singing part,
Image of the dancer in water,
Close up with soft red clay
The wound in the mystical bud;
For the dancer walking in the water
This is the body, this the blood.

Lawrence Durrell.

TWO SONNETS.

I

Five nights have crawled away. This gong, my sleep,
Still writhes like a whip, still drags its angry load
Of stings and echoes through my galloping head.
I hear the clocks and beetles sing and creep.
There have been wars before; and the same rope
Has hanged the murderer and the man of God.
Praise this cross doom. Shall Christ die in his bed?
One face I see, one hand that dare not grope
To scrape for mercy from the pardoner's face.
There is no home, no lost house where the lost
Find pardon and the outraged crouch for heat.
I see her face moving the floods of this place,
Calling in pain this vision is the last,
Drowned like a gong in wars of crumbling feet.

II

Remember now the avengers, while our days
And wars are dark, and the forgotten streets
Blind with the dead, and cowards sit in the gates,
For these pass by where burning Lenin lies
Holy and heathen in his tomb of glass.
From this world's miracles the burden beats
On each requited dusk, on the locked lights
That hide their mischief. Here the gibbet shows
Its rotting wood and iron and rope. The rest
Is all forejudged. Down the exalted hill
Walks Christ the Killer from his dreams of blood.
After these angers falls the animal blast;
And, somewhere, first like a tale that old men tell,
Visions are born, and harvests flash and fade.

Dorian Cooke.

TRANSLATIONS FROM RILKE.

ABISAG.

I

She lay. Her child-arms had been bound
by servants round the withering man
on whom she lay for sweet long hours,
a little frightened with his many years.

And when an owl screeched, now and then,
she turned her face round in his beard:
all that was night came and assembled
around her with desire and fear.

Stars trembled as though of her kind,
a scent went searching through the bedroom,
the curtain moved and gave a sign,
the sign was softly followed by her gaze.

But she held on to him, the dark old man;
and, by the night of nights not reached,
she lay, as royal blood grew chill beneath her,
virginal, weightless like a soul.

II

The king sat thinking of the empty day
of deeds performed and lusts unfelt
and of his favourite bitch which he attended to.
But in the evening, Abisag
curved over him. And his entangled life
lay, like a coast of bad repute, deserted,
beneath the constellation of her quiet breasts.

And, as a connoisseur of women,
he sometimes, through his eyebrows, recognised
the unmoved unkissed mouth;
and saw : the green twig of her feeling
did not bend down into his ground
He shivered. Listened like a dog.
and sought himself in his last blood

CHILDHOOD.

The school's long fear and time flow past
With nothing but dull things, with waiting.
O loneliness, o hard to pass the time...
And then out there : streets ring and sparkle,
and, in the squares, the fountains spring,
the world grows so wide in the gardens.—
And through all this to go in one's small dress,
quite different from the way the others go and went—:
O strange time, o to pass the time,
o loneliness.

And, distant, to gaze out into all this :
men, women; men, men, women,
and children, different and variegated;
and there a house and now and then a dog
and terror noiselessly alternating with confidence—:
O grief without a meaning, and o dream, o horror,
o depth without a ground.

And, in a garden that is softly fading,
to play thus : ball and ring and hoop,
and sometimes, in the hurry of the chase
blind and grown wild, brush against adults;
but in the evening, silent, with small stiff
steps to go home, firmly gripped—:
O ever more escaping comprehension.
o fear, o burden.

And, at the large grey pond, to kneel
for hours with a small sailing-boat;
and to forget it because other sails like it,
more beautiful, move through the water's rings,
and have to think about the small
pale face that, sinking, gleamed out of the pond—:
O childhood, fugitive comparisons.
Whither? Whither?

FROM THE *SONNETS TO ORPHEUS.*

II (8)

You few, the playmates of childhood gone by,
in gardens dispersed through the town :
how we found and, hesitant, liked one another
and, as the lamb with the speaking scroll,

spoke in muteness. When once we were glad,
it belonged to no one. Whose was it?
How it faded among all the going people
and in the anxiety of the long year.

Round us rolled carriages, strange, drawn past us,
round us stood houses, strong, but unreal,—
and none ever knew us. What was, in the universe, real?

Nothing. Only the balls. Their magnificent curves.
Nor were the children... But sometimes one,
ah one that was fading, stepped under the falling ball

II (17)

Where, in which forever-blissfully watered gardens, on which
trees, out of which tenderly un-petalled flowercups
ripen the strange fruits of consolation? Those, delicious,
one of which you may find in the trodden meadow

of your poverty. From one time to the other
you marvel at the size of the fruit,
at its being whole, at the tenderness of its skin,
and that you had not been deprived of it by the bird's levity and by the jealousy

of the worm below. Can it be there are trees haunted by angels
and so strangely cultivated by slow concealed gardeners
that they are bearing for us without being ours?

Have we never been able, we phantoms and shadows,
by our conduct—hastily ripened and withered again—
to disturb those tranquil summers' equanimity?

II (19).

Gold dwells somewhere in the pampering bank and affects
to be on intimate terms with thousands. But the blind man,
that beggar—to even a penny he is like a place lost from sight,
like the dusty corner under the cupboard.

Money feels quite at home in the shops and assumes
apparent disguise as silk, carnations and furs.
He who is silent stands in the breathing-space
of all money breathing, awake or asleep.

O how it closes at night, this hand ever open.
Tomorrow Fate will fetch it again, daily
holding it out : bright, wretched, unspeakably fragile.

Would that one, an onlooker, marvelling, finally grasped
and extolled its endurance. Only for him who sings, sayable.
Audible only to gods.

II (20)

Between the stars, what distance; and yet, how much more distant
is what one learns from the Here.
One, for instance, a child... and a neighbour, a second—,
o how inconceivably far.

Fate perhaps uses the span of existence to measure us with
and therefore appears to us strange;
think, how many spans already between maiden and man
when him she avoids and means.

All is remote—, and the circle is nowhere closed.
See on the dish, on a table cheerfully spread,
strange, the faces of fish.

Fishes are dumb... was once thought. Who knows?
But is not, perhaps, there a place where is spoken
what would be the language of fishes, *without* them?

(Translated by Ruth Speirs.)

PLANES.

From mountains see a plain breaks,
Like a colt from the holder's hand,
Pushing into Time to make there
A lying place, a lowing place, a pasture;
But ever uneveness harries the loam
And flatness is never. Beyond the river
Vineyards scrawl on the arable land
And stone again crops out where shepherd faces
Peer at the plain's spent sally,
The sloping meadow on the mountain side.

What I have tried to be, a becoming,
Gone with a thought from my father's hand,
Is not here and is not there,
Is neither here nor there,
Is in the mountains.
In first and last and not in middle,
In boundary rock and terminal ridge,
Resides the spirit level.

Robin Fedden.

ORPHEUS RETURNED ALONE.

I supposed that as those fortunate,
Rothschild or the blest Saint John,
I too could make my point, become
A gorgeous owner or assume sweet sanctity.
Seeing the Baron and the loved Saint John
I had forgotten the guttering fingers of Haydon
So long compelled in vain;
Ignorant still ignored
Sinew and heartbeat balance no scales,
Climbers of kingdom or saintliness
Come with no surety home.

None can predict he carries
Colours of defeat or fortunate victory.
The musical instrument in the blood
Is double-strung at birth;
Time unravelled shows
We run as Orpheus did
On hopeless errands.
All may descend (a myth once strange to me),
All may return without Eurydice.

Robin Fedden.